



The new face of Chilean Cabernet

It has a long history of making Chile's most famous labels, but Cabernet Sauvignon's popularity among both producers and drinkers has waned over recent years, its quality suffering in the process.

Peter Richards MW reports on how winemakers are now refocusing their efforts on elegant, terroir-driven Cabernets

CHILEANS ARE OFTEN stereotyped as being straightlaced and undemonstrative. A bit English, if you like. A good way to prove this isn't entirely true is to ask a Chilean winemaker what's wrong with the country's Cabernet Sauvignon. Some agree vehemently with the diagnosis and embark on a protracted bout of soul-searching. Others reject the notion and defend their corner fiercely. Even high-profile international consultants become heated.

Either way, it's instructive to witness the depth of feeling surrounding Cabernet in

Chile. It's something that might have been overlooked of late, as what might be perceived as 'Cabernet fatigue' has set in among both wine drinkers and winemakers. A favourite quote in response to my questioning was this: 'The proverbial "rocket up the arse" might be a good thing to get the industry to rethink its approach to Cabernet Sauvignon. Anything that can help Chile make more interesting wine has to be a good thing.'

At this point, it's worth considering the context of Cabernet Sauvignon in Chile.

Above: a number of Chilean producers are keen to take risks and upgrade the image of their Cabernets

'We didn't actually like the [Cabernet] wines we were making. That's why we had to change'

Marcelo Retamal (second from left)

On the one hand, it's the cornerstone of Chilean wine production. It covers a third of the national vineyard area (see box below) and has long been the aristocrat of Chilean wine grapes, brought from Bordeaux by the wealthy Chilean elite in the 19th century and used as the source of the country's most prestigious wines. In short, Cabernet is an indivisible part of the national winemaking DNA.

Nevertheless, Cabernet's precedence in Chile is now being challenged. This is partly the result of the ever-greater diversity in Chilean wine – of grape varieties, producers, styles, terroirs and so on. But it's also down to the fact that Cabernet has long underperformed in Chile. I regularly taste line-ups of Chilean Cabs and for too long have been assailed by a bland uniformity of overripe fruit, chewy tannins and a fiery, alcoholic finish. This issue came to the fore in a recent *Decanter* panel tasting (June 2015 issue), where not a single Cabernet Sauvignon was rated Outstanding (18.5/20 points or above) and in which verdicts from the tasters included, 'hard going', 'very disappointing' and 'boring'.

Change of mindset

It's important to add that there are always exceptions to any generalisation, and not everyone agrees with this verdict. But many do. As leading winemaker Marcelo Retamal puts it bluntly: 'Both I and the De Martino family realised we didn't actually like the Cabernets we were making. That's why we had to change.' Francisco Baettig of Errázuriz takes up the theme: 'Cabernet got left behind as Chile found more exciting varieties and regions to focus on. We let ourselves be lulled into the impression that Cabernet was easy to make.'

Talking to winemakers and viticulturists, most attribute at least part of the problem to the health of the vineyards. Many Chilean Cabernet vines are having to be grubbed up prematurely, the result of poor vine material and site/soil selection, viruses, pests, and the trend for stressing vines by underirrigating in the search for greater intensity. As Morandé winemaker Ricardo Baettig says: 'We overstressed our Cabernet for years in the 1990s and early 2000s. Now we're paying the price.' Questionable winemaking policies have also



Chilean Cabernet Sauvignon: the facts

Area under vine
42,195ha – 32% of total vineyard area of 130,362ha

Key regions
Colchagua (12,445ha),
Maule (10,802ha),
Maipo (6,669ha),
Curicó (5,404ha)

Sources: SAG Catastro 2013, Origo Chilean Wine Regions Map

been to blame. Retamal explains: 'People harvest grapes overripe because they're terrified of pyrazines [that give vegetal notes], but then use cultured yeasts and new oak. This makes for standardised, samey wines.'

There is also a structural issue, says Casas del Bosque's winemaker, New Zealander Grant Phelps: 'Bigger wineries can take Cabernet for granted as it's such a workhorse variety, and there is a tendency to base picking decisions on a winery's logistical needs rather than on the ripeness of the fruit.'

Sebastian De Martino adds a telling point: 'The structure of the Chilean industry does not allow much stylistic risk-taking. Most of Chile's sales are in retail and consumers expect a certain style. The more you focus on this, the more risk averse you become.'

Taking risks

Risk versus safety. It's a dilemma that confronts winemakers the world over and has become a key agenda in Chilean wine of late. The good news for Cabernet lovers is that a growing number of forward-thinking winemakers – endorsed laudably and vitally by those holding the purse strings – are choosing the risky route. The results are only just starting to filter through, but there are now a significant number of projects specifically focusing on coaxing elegance, terroir expression and grace from Chilean Cabernet. It's a big vehicle to shift, but the wheel is turning.

Take Marcelo Papa, the man who makes the biggest-selling Chilean Cabernet brand in the world, Casillero del Diablo. At Puente Alto, >



Above: Concha y Toro's Cabernet vineyards at Puente Alto produce fruit for Casillero del Diablo

the nerve centre of Concha y Toro's gargantuan winemaking operations, I found a man who, rather than smugly contemplating his achievements, was scurrying eagerly around a cellar packed full of new Italian botti (large oak vats), syphoning off copious samples to champion the virtues of early picking and minimal oak impact on his Marqués Cabernet (see also 'A big adventure', p62).

'It's a strong change of mindset,' enthuses Papa. 'We went too far with the fashion for picking late, getting up to 15% alcohol and beyond. The wines got good scores but needed significant winemaking intervention to ensure the right acidity and alcohol levels. In 2010 I decided to change tack, employing more focused viticulture in order to harvest the Cabernet a month earlier, reducing the use of new barrels and now using botti to give wines a fresher, more linear character. It's a style we did make once but lost; now this is the new recipe for a new era.'

When old is new again

Taking inspiration from Chile's long history with Cabernet is something that fellow Maipo stalwart Santa Carolina is also doing to great effect. Having rediscovered beautiful and rare older vintages of Macul Cabernet from the 1950s and 1960s in its cellars (still delicious now), the team decided to embark on a 'living heritage' project. They started to identify and propagate old pre-phylloxera Cabernet plant material, and they also decided to make a top-level Cabernet from older vines that harked back to the historic Chilean Cabernet paradigm of a low-alcohol, scented, mid-weight wine capable of long ageing.



'I stopped fearing the critics and felt free to make Cabernet the way I believe it should be made: with a sense of personality, identity and risk'

Rafael Urrejola (left)

The result is Luis Pereira, a wine launched in 2015 (as a pre-release) and the result of old vines, early harvests, careful extraction and ageing in large oak vats. 'Cabernet is king but it had lost its way,' says Santa Carolina's Christian Wylie. 'It took us a while to realise that we had the tools and records to help us rescue and revive this important part of Chile's heritage.' Head winemaker Andres Caballero says the learning process involved in Luis Pereira has now changed the winery's approach to its other wines. 'This project made me do the hardest thing of my life, which was start again and totally re-evaluate how I make wine,' he admits. 'First I had to convince myself to change. Then I had to convince my team to change. And now I need to convince the world!'

Changing the world is not an ambition readily associated with Chilean Cabernet Sauvignon, but it's symptomatic of a new, heartfelt desire among the country's winemaking elite to upgrade the image of their emblematic grape. ➤

'Some Chilean Cabernets are still too safe, trying to please everyone,' observes Undurraga head winemaker Rafael Urrejola. 'But there are now some great Cabs made by people taking more risks, looking for real Cabernet character. Personally I stopped fearing the critics and felt free to make Cabernet the way I believe it should be made. That means healthy vines from a cool area with alluvial soils, early picked, using less new oak, giving good acidity, balanced alcohol, firm tannins and herbal scented notes. Wines, ultimately, with a sense of personality, identity – and risk.'

Diversity and potential

Ventisquero's new approach with its impressive Enclave project is also paying dividends. Head winemaker Felipe Tosso says: 'Cabernet Sauvignon is a complicated variety that only produces well in very specific terroirs. We still need to improve. Part of this entails having an honest discussion about what constitutes a good Cabernet, but we've also been focusing on improving our plant material and on identifying the best terroirs for the grape. Coastal sites can work, but for us altitude works well in the east, providing less light, good drainage and minimal stress. We're ultimately aiming for elegance, balance and finesse in the finished wines.'



'Bigger wineries can take Cabernet for granted ... basing picking decisions on logistical needs rather than on the ripeness of the fruit' Grant Phelps (above)

Such work takes time, however. Marcelo Retamal has been hugely influential in his move to challenge standardisation. 'Today, in some areas, Chile has world-class potential to make top-quality Cabernet Sauvignon,' he says.

CHILEAN CABERNET

'It's just up to us to realise that potential. But it will take some time before these wines are in the market, making their full impact.'

Now is a critical time in the evolution of Chilean Cabernet. It will be intriguing to see and taste the results of all these new initiatives – but initial signs are promising. There is room for diversity in Chilean Cabernet, and the potential for far more drinkability and quality than has been in evidence lately. As Sebastian De Martino comments: 'It's not rocket science, just common sense.' Grant Phelps also puts it well when he says, 'Chile has it all, viticulturally speaking, so there's absolutely no excuse for not making cracking Cabernet here.'

The final word goes to renowned Australian winemaker Brian Croser, whose sole external consultancy is for Santa Rita. 'There is a wildness to the flavour of Chilean Cabernet that is difficult to tame. Bordeaux isn't the right backdrop when considering Chilean Cabernets. They are unique: Australia, South Africa and California can't achieve the same intensity and purity of fruit. Sophistication is difficult to achieve, but when it happens the result is monumental.' ■

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Richards' pick of the 'new' Chilean Cabernet Sauvignons

Ventisquero, Enclave, Pirque, Maipo 2011
18.5 (95)
£45 Amathus, Buy Great Wine, Davy's, Love Wine, The Wine Centre, Wine Chambers
This beautiful Cabernet is all

about texture. Wonderful tobacco perfume and grippy yet fine tannins: super classy.
Drink 2015-2030 **Alcohol** 14%

Casas del Bosque, Gran Bosque Reserva Privada, Alto Maipo 2012 18 (93)
£35 ABS Wine, AC Gallie, Christopher Piper, Love Wine
Rich, attention-grabbing stuff, but also grippy and structured. Compelling.
Drink 2015-2022 **Aic** 14.5%

De Martino, Las Aguilas, Maipo 2011 17.5 (91)
£22.95 Aveyrs, Berry Bros & Rudd
This vintage marked the brave new dawn for De Martino: earlier harvests, fresher, more natural styles.

Some lovely development here, with a subtle scent and wonderful tannic finesse.
Drink 2015-2022 **Aic** 13.5%

Garage Wine Co, Lot 37, Alto Maipo 2011 17.5 (91)
£20 Bibendum PLB, Slurp
Herbal notes, tea leaf and mineral graphite notes complement the dark berry fruit. Elegant, linear and lifted to the finish. **Drink** 2015-2023 **Aic** 13.9%

Cono Sur, 20 Barrels, Maipo 2013 17 (90)
£14.95 The Wine Society
Cono Sur has just released its new über-Cabernet Silencio but this 20 Barrels is fabulous value: elegant,

earthy, savoury, harmonious.
Drink 2015-2022 **Aic** 13.5%

Crazy Wines, Triangle, Cauquenes, Maule 2008 17 (90)
N/A UK via www.domusaurea.cl
From the same winemaker as Domus Aurea (right), Frenchman Jean-Pascal Lacaze has crafted a wonderfully juicy Cabernet from old Cauquenes vines.
Drink 2015-2018 **Aic** 13.3%

Quebrada de Macul, Domus Aurea, Maicul, Maipo 2010 17 (90)
£39.99 Naked Wines
The alcohol is a touch invasive, but nevertheless there's still some lovely Cabernet leaf and berry scents, plus a

fine, firm structure. **Drink** 2015-2022 **Aic** 14.5%

San Pedro, 1865 Single Vineyard, Maipo 2013 17 (90)
£13.99 Bibendum PLB
This boasts lovely, silky dark fruit with an elegant herbal edge. An accomplished and understated wine with a lingering and spicy finish. Excellent value. **Drink** 2015-2020 **Aic** 14.5%

Santa Rita, Casa Real, Maipo 2011 17 (90)
£22.50-£34.95 AC Gallie, Amazon, Berkmann, Hawkshead Wines, Hedonism, Love Wine, Slurp, The Wine Society
Tense but plush, there's a lovely

balance to this wine, and it should age well too. **Drink** 2015-2025 **Aic** 14%

Undurraga, TH, Pirque, Maipo 2012 16.5 (88)
£12-£13 Charles Rose, H2Vin, Hailsham Cellars, Nikolls & Perks, Vagabond, Winedirect
Notable restraint on the nose is followed up by a super-fine, juicy, linear palate profile. Great value. **Drink** 2015-2024 **Aic** 14%

William Fèvre Chile, Espino Gran Cuvée, Pirque, Maipo 2011 16.5 (88)
£15 Berry Bros & Rudd
Deliberately restrained, juicy, lifted style that's not the most complex but is wonderfully herbal, fresh and

drinkable all the same.
Drink 2015-2017 **Aic** 13.6%

Casillero del Diablo, Reserva, Central Valley 2013 16 (86)
£6.79-£8 Amazon, Concha y Toro
Benchmark Chilean Cab. For one of the world's biggest brands, this is expressive, rounded and well judged. **Drink** 2015-2016 **Aic** 13.5%

For stockist details, see p111

